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# Survival in the Ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky

## A Microhistorical Inquiry

### Abstract

The ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky was the largest in Romanian-controlled Transnistria. Despite this, no study devoted exclusively to this ghetto exists to this day. In the present article I take a microhistorical approach to illuminate aspects of ghetto life and probe the experience of the individual. Framed around the narrative of one man's oral history held at the Fortunoff Archive of Holocaust Testimonies, I follow the stations of passage within the ghetto, seeking to highlight those places where agency engendered survival and where circumstances overtook any control an individual may have held.

*The most immediate impact of atrocity is on the cosmos of each individual self;  
and it is that impact we need to grasp first if we are to understand something  
of the nature of such events and their consequences.*  
Eva Hoffman<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

A young woman, writing in 1955 ten years after her release from the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky in Transnistria, elaborately recounted a passionate romance in the spring of 1941, then the shocking execution of her brother and father in a violent pogrom in her Bukovina village, and the subsequent deportation of herself and her mother to Transnistria: "We were driven out into the open and chased with the rest of our people to the death camps." She then leapt immediately to liberation, omitting any detail related to the three years in the ghetto: "As unbelievable as it seems, Mama and I survived the horror. It must have been a miracle, I cannot explain it any other way."<sup>2</sup>

That this young woman, Blanka Lebzelter, in a lonely moment in 1955 in communist Romania, preferred to pen several pages describing in detail her youthful affair with a flattering young doctor rather than the "horror" of her ghetto years, comes as no surprise. However, for myself, as her biographer and a historian examining the context surrounding her writings,<sup>3</sup> her almost complete omission of these

- 1 Eva Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge: Memory, History and the Legacy of the Holocaust* (New York: Public Affairs 2004), 163.
- 2 Leo Baeck Institute Archives (LBI), New York City, Blanca Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, Folder 1, "Lieber Walter" [Dear Walter] (1955). Unless otherwise noted, translations from German and Romanian of the diaries and other sources are my own.
- 3 For an introduction to the diaries and my project, see my article "What Meaning Can the Keeping of a Diary Have for a Person Like Me: Spaces of Survivor Agency under Postwar Oppression," in *European Holocaust Studies*, eds. Natalia Aleksiu and Hana Kubátová, vol. 3, *Places, Spaces and Voids in the Holocaust* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 299–311. Gaëlle Fischer also drew on the diaries in her article "Between Liberation and Emigration: Jews from Bukovina in Romania after the Second World War," *Leo Baeck Institute Yearbook* no. 62 (2017): 115–132.

three crucial and formational years from all her texts poses a discrete challenge.<sup>4</sup> Lebzelter's recently found post-war diaries record a range of vivid and intimate details about survivor life in Romania from 1948 to 1961, but it is clear that the war and associated trauma lived through at that time formed her existential foundation, described by scholar Eva Hoffman, who likewise experienced post-war eastern Europe, as "the heavy ground of being, the natural condition to which the world tended, and could at any moment revert".<sup>5</sup> The traumatic losses of the war weave their way into Lebzelter's daily interactions and reflections, and yet, in her writings, she consistently and carefully sidesteps describing the Transnistrian period. My larger analysis, however, which examines the diaries from the perspectives of gender, communist history, trauma theory, and survivor experience, requires that I gather tactile details of what Lebzelter confronted for almost three years.

The task that I then set myself, while I was a fellow at the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute, was to attempt to conceptualise and make tangible the "horror", as she termed it, which Lebzelter survived. Though Transnistria has, in the meantime, been addressed by scholars from multiple perspectives, a microhistorical approach has still seldom been taken.<sup>6</sup> I was keen to examine the experience on an intimate and individual level; moreover, I wanted to probe the specificity of the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto, which thus far has not been the exclusive focus of any one article or scholarly work. During my fellowship, I worked primarily with oral history testimonies from the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies of Yale University. I chose to organise my study and this article around one man's testimony; however, I also quote from and draw on other testimonies, in addition to incorporating other primary sources, such as memoirs or diaries, and secondary sources.<sup>7</sup>

This article is structured as such: I first survey existing scholarship on Transnistria and its ghettos and outline my impetus to work microhistorically. I then explain my decision to select the testimony of Norbert Nadler for the article's narrative centre, and I turn to the individual experience of this man, following him chronologically from the time of his deportation to Transnistria in 1941 to his release by the Red Army in the spring of 1944. Lebzelter herself exits the stage at this point. Her story and fate formed the catalyst for my inquiry and are fundamental to my work as a scholar, but I will not directly address her own experience, about which in the end I can make informed conjectures, but few categorical declarations.<sup>8</sup>

4 Blanka Lebzelter kept four diaries from 1948 to 1961, totalling over eight hundred entries. In addition, in the mid-1950s she wrote three long letters filled with biographical details to her deceased brother, fiancé (also killed in 1941), and mother. Though in these letters she recounts in graphic detail the pogrom during which her brother and father were murdered, she writes almost nothing about her years in Transnistria. In the letter to her brother, she summarises the three years in two sentences: "During the war Mama and I spent three years in the Nazi extermination camps. We were forced to suffer the most horrible torments there, hunger, cold, vermin, a small, hard board to sleep on and at the mercy of henchmen who could string us up at any moment or hunt us to a cruel death." LBI, Blanca Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, Box 1, Folder 1, "Mein Bruder" [My Brother] (1955).

5 Hoffman, *After Such Knowledge*, 4–5.

6 I review existing scholarship on Transnistria and its ghettos in detail in the section below.

7 Portions of this article are used in my related "Critical Editions" essay for the Fortunoff Archive, "Introduction to the Testimony of Norbert Nadler." See also Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies, Yale University Library, Norbert N., Holocaust Video Testimony (HVT) 536.

8 Unfortunately, planned visits to archives in Romania or Ukraine which could have shed some scant light on Lebzelter's individual experience were not possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I have yet to find her name in any archival material available online.

## Scholarship on Transnistria: An Overview

Almost twenty years ago, in her review of several new publications on the Romanian Holocaust, historian Irina Livezeanu lamented the fact that the “Romanian Holocaust has mostly been the object of neglect and distortion”, reflecting on why “the topic has not fully emerged into the ‘limelight’ of scholarly attention”.<sup>9</sup> Though ultimately critical of the works reviewed, she nevertheless applauded the publications as an important step, noting, however, in her conclusion that the incorporation of memoirs or similar ego-documents and testimonies would “give orders and statistics a human perspective and help with the challenge of interpretation”.<sup>10</sup> Several years later, in 2012, historian Roland Clark performed a new survey of the field, taking stock of the progress made since Livezeanu’s implicit challenge to future scholars.<sup>11</sup> Though new publications had brought the field forward and provided new insights, from a methodological perspective the area remained remarkably monotone, with few larger studies incorporating interdisciplinary methodologies, moving beyond examining larger narratives, or utilising, as Clark asserts, “the nuanced perspectives that cultural and gender histories” could offer.<sup>12</sup>

So, where are we now? As noted, foundational research on the atrocities committed by the Romanians during the Second World War has been performed.<sup>13</sup> From a macro perspective trained on the perpetrators, the guilt of Antonescu and his government has been discussed from multiple sides,<sup>14</sup> the German element has been examined,<sup>15</sup> and the ethnic element has been reviewed.<sup>16</sup> Dalia Ofer surveyed ghetto life in Transnistria relatively early on<sup>17</sup> (in the post-communist period) and com-

9 Irina Livezeanu, “The Romanian Holocaust: Family Quarrels,” *East European Politics and Societies* 16, no. 3 (2002): 934–947.

10 Livezeanu, “Family Quarrels,” 947. Shortly thereafter, Peter Weber also noted and regretted the lack of testimonies in the early works on Transnistria, arguing for their incorporation in future studies and introducing and elaborating on four testimonial sources. Peter Weber, “Eyewitness Testimonies as Source of a Historical Analysis of the Deportations to Transnistria (1941–1943),” *Études balkaniques* 4 (2004): 28–34.

11 Roland Clark, “New Models, New Questions: Historiographical Approaches to the Romanian Holocaust,” *European Review of History*, 19, no. 2 (2012): 303–320.

12 Clark, “New Models,” 315. In addition to providing an overview of the Romanian scholarly response to the Romanian Holocaust over time, Clark specifically reviews four new works: Denis Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–44* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Jean Ancel, *The Economic Destruction of Romanian Jewry* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2007); Armin Heinen, *Rumänien, der Holocaust und die Logik der Gewalt* [Romania, the Holocaust, and the Logic of Violence] (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag, 2007); and Vladimir Solonari, *Purifying the Nation: Population Exchange and Ethnic Cleansing in Nazi-Allied Romania* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2009).

13 Some key titles in this regard are Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania: The Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940–1944* (Chicago: Ivan R Dee 2000); *Final Report of the International Commission on the Holocaust in Romania*, eds. Tuvia Friling, Radu Ioanid, and Mihail E. Ionescu (Iasi: Polirom 2005); Mariana Hausleitner, *Rumänien und der Holocaust: zu den Massenverbrechen in Transnistrien 1941–1944* [Romania and the Holocaust: On the Criminal Acts against Humanity in Transnistria 1941–1944] (Berlin: Metropol-Verlag, 2001); Matias Carp, ed., *Cartea neagră: Fapte și documente: suferințele evreilor din România în timpul dictaturii fasciste, 1940–1944* [Black Book: Facts and Documents on the Suffering of the Jews from Romania during the Fascist Dictatorship], 3 vols. (Bucharest: Socec, 1946–1948); and Jean Ancel, ed., *Transnistria*, 3 vols. (Bucharest: Atlas, 1998). For a more recent publication, see *Romania and the Holocaust: Events–Contexts–Aftermath*, ed. Simon Geissbühler (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017). On the pogroms in villages in Bukovina prior to the deportations, see Simon Geissbühler, *Blutiger Juli: Rumänien Vernichtungskrieg und der vergessene Massenmord an den Juden 1941* [Bloody July: Romania’s War of Annihilation and the Forgotten Mass Murder of Jews] (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 2013).

14 Deletant, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally*, and Heinen, *Rumänien, der Holocaust*.

15 Hildrun Glass, *Deutschland und die Verfolgung der Juden in rumänischen Machtbereich, 1940–1944* [Germany and the Persecution of the Jews in Romanian Sphere of Power, 1940–1944] (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2014).

16 Solonari, *A Satellite Empire*.

17 Dalia Ofer, “Life in the Ghettos of Transnistria,” *Yad Vashem Studies* 25 (1996): 229–274.

pared the conditions to ghettos under German control.<sup>18</sup> Scholars have focused their lenses on individual ghettos, including Golta,<sup>19</sup> Zhmerinka,<sup>20</sup> Shargorod,<sup>21</sup> Djurin,<sup>22</sup> and Murafa,<sup>23</sup> and looked closely at ghetto social structures.<sup>24</sup>

Men inhabiting the fraught role of leader in the ghetto context have been scrutinised, both in the studies cited above as well as in articles specifically addressing the dilemmas confronting individual men and councils.<sup>25</sup> Reflective, interdisciplinary studies have appeared, some incorporating family histories,<sup>26</sup> others analysing these

18 Dalia Ofer, "The Ghettos in Transnistria and Ghettos under German Occupation in Eastern Europe: A Comparative Approach," *Im Ghetto 1939–1945: Neue Forschungen zu Alltag und Umfeld*, eds. Christoph Dieckmann and Babette Quinkert (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2009), 30–53.

19 Dennis Deletant, "Ghetto Experience in Golta, Transnistria, 1942–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 1–26. Deletant writes that "the study of ghetto life and conditions under Romanian rule in Transnistria [...] has cast a spotlight on major ghettos such as Moghilev, Bershad, and Shargorod", citing, however, as examples three works written by those imprisoned in the respective ghetto, two of whom held leadership positions at the time. I argue that these works, though immeasurably valuable, cannot be described as academic "studies" as such, but are rather primary sources at our disposal. In fact, there are no academic studies of length on the Moghilev ghetto. On the Bershad ghetto, see Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home: The Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 274–286. They also write about the Vapniarka ghetto: see the chapter "There Was Never a Camp Here!" in Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*, 197–231.

20 Vadim Altskan, "On the Other Side of the River: Dr. Adolph Herschmann and the Zhmerinka Ghetto, 1941–1944," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 26, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 2–28.

21 Iemima D. Ploscariu, "Institutions for Survival: The Shargorod Ghetto during the Holocaust in Romanian Transnistria," *Nationalities Papers* 47, no. 1 (2019): 121–135.

22 Sarah Rosen, "The Djurin Ghetto in Transnistria through the Lens of Kunstadt's Diary," in *Romania and the Holocaust: Events–Context–Aftermath*, ed. Simon Geissbühler (Stuttgart: ibidem Verlag, 2016), 131–150.

23 Sarah Rosen, "Surviving Murafa Ghetto: A Case Study of One Ghetto in Transnistria," *Holocaust Studies: A Journal of Culture and History* 16, nos. 1–2 (2010): 157–176.

24 Ana Barbulescu, "The Underlife of Transnistria's Ghettos: Recategorizing and Reframing Social Interaction," *The Journal of Holocaust Research* 35, no. 3 (2021): 196–213, and Ana Barbulescu, "Official Order and Ritual Disobedience in Transnistria's Ghettos," *Sfera Politicii* 6, no. 182 (2014): 114–126.

25 In the Zhmerinka ghetto, Dr. Adolph Herschmann, held the position of leader; he was later tried, convicted, and executed by the Soviet courts for collaborating with the enemy. See Altskan, *Zhmerinka Ghetto*. In Shargorod, this was Meir Teich; for his own account, see Meir Teich, "The Jewish Self-Administration in Ghetto Shargorod (Transnistria)," *Yad Vashem Studies, Jerusalem* (1958), 219–254. For a scholarly review, see Ploscariu, *Institutions for Survival*. The man who assumed the leadership in Moghilev for a part of the time was Siegfried Jagendorf; like Teich, he later wrote an account of the period from his perspective: Siegfried Jagendorf, *Jagendorf's Foundry: A Memoir of the Romanian Holocaust 1941–1944*, ed. Aron Hirt-Manheimer (New York: Harper Collins, 1991). In his article, Altskan posited that, while initial studies on Transnistria addressed the broader picture, less attention was paid to individual ghettos or the roles of Jewish councils. My position takes this a step further, asserting that, at the current moment, very little attention has been paid to individual victims, in particular the most impoverished, those who perished, and women. While I understand that the historiographical process must first reckon with the large picture and – generally – the men who moved the gears, with interest thereafter trickling down to men who held leadership positions in smaller units, I believe we have long arrived at the moment in which scholars can and should be examining the lives of those on the lower rungs of the ghetto. This focus, however, requires diverse and complex methodological approaches, in light of the frequent absence of significant archival material about the lowest classes. That fact should not be a barrier but a challenge. See, for example, Nupur Chaudhuri, Sherry J. Katz, and Mary Elizabeth Perry, *Contesting Archives: Finding Women in the Sources* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010). For more on ghetto leadership, see Gali Mir-Tibon, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?: Jewish Committees in the Ghetto of the Mogilev District and the Romanian Authorities in Transnistria, 1941–1944," in *The Ghetto in Global History: 1500 to the Present*, eds. Wendy Z. Goldman and Joe William Trotter (London: Routledge, 2017), 127–146. On the post-war Soviet trials of several persons for "collaboration," see Wolfgang Schneider, "From the Ghetto to the Gulag, from the Ghetto to Israel: Soviet Collaboration Trials against the Shargorod Ghetto's Jewish Council," *Journal of Modern Jewish History* 17, no. 1 (2019): 83–97, and Diana Dumitru, "The Gordian Knot of Justice: Prosecuting Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Stalinist Courts for 'Collaboration' with the Enemy," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 22, no. 4 (2021): 729–756. On Jewish leadership during the war, see also Iemima Ploscariu, "Speaking out in Times of Crisis: Differentiability in Romanian Jewish Leadership, 1938–1944," *East European Jewish Affairs* 49, no. 3 (2019): 200–219.

26 For works incorporating personal testimonies with historical analysis, see especially Hirsch and Spitzer, *Ghosts of Home*. Two slender volumes collecting interviews interspersed with historical narrative are Gaby Coldewey et al., eds., "Czernowitz is gewen an alte, jidische Schtot...": *Jüdische Überlebende berichten* ["Czernowitz Was an Old, Jewish Town ...": Jewish Survivors Narrate] (Berlin: Heinrich-Böll Stiftung, 1999), and

very works.<sup>27</sup> Questions around materiality have been broached<sup>28</sup> and issues related to memory are woven throughout many of the works cited that are related to survivor testimonies.<sup>29</sup> Recent monographs by Diana Dumitru and Gaëlle Fischer, which deftly incorporate testimonies, archival material, and narrative force, address respectively the influence of pre-war politics on wartime interethnic relations and the legacy of wartime events on the Bukovinian diaspora.<sup>30</sup>

The above survey makes clear the significant advances in scholarship in the field of Transnistria and the Romanian Holocaust that have been made in the past decade.<sup>31</sup> It is thus all the more surprising that a study devoted to the largest of the Transnistrian ghettos does not exist.<sup>32</sup>

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Gaby Coldewey et al., eds., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan: Lebenserinnerungen Czernowitzer Juden* [Between the Prut and the Jordan: Life Memories of Czernowitz Jews] (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003). There are numerous memoirs, such as: Mirjam Korber, *Deportiert: Jüdische Überlebensschicksale aus Rumänien 1941–1944: Ein Tagebuch* [Deported: Jewish Survivor Fates from Romania 1941–1944: A Diary] (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 1993); Ruth Glasberg Gold, *Ruth's Journey: A Survivor's Memoir* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1997); Klara Schächter, *Woss ich hob durchgelebt/Was ich durchgemacht habe: Brief einer Judin aus der Bukowina verfasst in Transnistrien 1943* [What I Survived: The Letter of a Jewish Woman from Bukovina Composed in Transnistria 1943] (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 1996); Emil Wenkert, *Czernowitzer Schicksale: Vom Ghetto nach Transnistrien deportiert: Jüdische Schicksale 1941–1944* [Czernowitz Fates: Deported from the Ghetto to Transnistria: Jewish Fates 1941–1944], ed. Erhard Roy Wiehn (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 2001); Yosef Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction: Recollections of Transnistria and Illegal Immigration to Eretz Israel 1941–1947* (Portland: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007); Arnold Daghani, "Lasst mich leben!": *Stationen im Leben des Künstlers Arnold Daghani* ["Let me Live!": Stations in the Life of the Artist Arnold Daghani], eds. Felix Rieper and Mollie Brandl Bowen (Lüneberg: zu Klumpen, 2002).

27 Articles looking, in turn, at some of the many memoirs, testimonies, and memoir-like pieces, include: Stefan Ionescu, "The Boom of Testimonies after Communism: The Voices of Jewish Holocaust Survivors in Romania (1989–2005)," *Studia Hebraica* 5 (2005): 357–380; Dana Radler, "Bonded to Memory: *Terracotta Ovens of My Childhood* by Elite Olshtain," *British and American Studies* 24 (2018), 179–188; Carol Simon Elias, "The Search for Politanky: A Hidden Holocaust Refuge in Transnistria," *European Judaism* 52, no. 1 (2019): 119–134; Sonja Knopp, "Narrative Fissures, Historical Context: When Traumatic Memory is Compromised," *Contemporary Psychoanalysis* 21, no. 2 (2014): 229–238.

28 Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Testimonial Objects: Memory, Gender and Transmission," *Thamyris/Intersecting* no. 13 (2006), 137–164, and Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, "Small Acts of Repair: The Unclaimed Legacy of the Romanian Holocaust," *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 4, nos. 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2015), 13–42.

29 This is especially true for all of the works by Hirsch and Spitzer. See also Louise O. Vasvari, "En-gendering Memory through Holocaust Alimentary Life Writing," *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17, no. 3 (2015).

30 Diana Dumitru, *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust: The Borderlands of Romania and the Soviet Union* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), and Gaëlle Fisher, *Resettlers and Survivors: Bukovina and the Politics of Belonging in West Germany and Israel, 1945–1989* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2020).

31 Noticeably lacking from this overview are studies incorporating the "spatial turn," which seems to have made almost no imprint at all, despite the fact that the Transnistrian Holocaust in particular, with its hundreds of ghettos and camps and fluid boundaries between captivity and (relative) freedom (as attested to in the testimonies of survivors), represents a topic ripe for detailed spatial analysis. The ghetto in Moghilev-Podolsky was the largest of the Transnistrian ghettos, with thousands of residents. Yet, a simple map of the streets has not, to my knowledge, been recreated by scholars – the most fundamental information on the physicality of the site is missing. This may be due partially to difficulties in accessing archives, but it is still startling. On the spatial turn in Holocaust studies, see especially Tim Cole and Anne Kelly Knowles, "Thinking Spatially about the Holocaust," *European Holocaust Studies*, eds. Natalia Aleksion and Hana Kubátová, vol. 3, *Places, Spaces and Voids in the Holocaust* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2021), 291–296. Their definition of "spatial thinking" is wide and raises numerous intriguing points of inquiry. Amongst other things, the "spatial turn" "1) ask[s] explicitly geographical questions starting with the most obvious question 'where?' to sit alongside the historian's question 'when?'; 2) treat[s] space, places, landscape, and the materiality of physical environments not as background or the stage set of history, but as meaningful subjects of study in their own right [...]" (291). See also Anne Kelly Knowles, Tim Cole, and Alberto Giordano, eds., *Geographies of the Holocaust* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).

32 There are, of course, entries on Moghilev in both of the encyclopaedias devoted to camps: Geoffrey P. Megargee et al., "Moghilev-Podolsk," *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), 3:715–717; Guy Miron, ed., "Moghilev-Podolskiy," *The Yad Vashem Encyclopedia of the Ghettos during the Holocaust* (Jerusalem: Yad Vashem, 2009), 1:493–496;



## “Humaniz[ing] Abstract Ideas”:<sup>33</sup> A Microhistorical Approach

In this article, I approach the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky from a microhistorical perspective. In their introduction to *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman describe microhistorical probes as “call[ing] into question the certainties of earlier historiographies, notably the grand explanations based on economic and cultural determinations, by granting renewed importance to individual practices and experiences”. They posit that such an approach awards “increased attention to the categories of actors, the strategies of individuals and small groups, as well as to ways of writing history”.<sup>34</sup>

Correspondingly, my aim here is not to execute an overarching analysis that, for example, compares Moghilev with smaller ghettos that have been examined in scholarly publications. Neither do I, in the context of a circumscribed article, aim to explore exhaustively the spectrum of ghetto life in Moghilev, which is indeed a matter worthy for a book-length project.<sup>35</sup> Instead, I seek to plumb the experience of one individual as he encountered the primary themes of ghetto life. The central contours of disease, hunger, starvation, exposure, and destitution have been touched upon by every scholar writing on Transnistria and its ghettos. This article aims to step away from the blurred image afforded by the general and to chronicle the fine-grained experience of an individual. Tracing the trajectory of one individual during a period of exceptional duress may more readily grant insight into concepts of survival, trauma, and agency, as “it is on the micro-level that the agency of the ordinary people can be preserved”.<sup>36</sup>

### Choosing a Narrative: Norbert Nadler

Due to my underlying quest to apprehend Lebzelter’s experience, I sought a testimony from an individual with similar biographical traits: a young adult, no longer a child, nor yet a parent, from an educated, Bukovinian background.<sup>37</sup> I eventually selected an interview with Norbert Nadler, a man of Lebzelter’s age who had lived under circumstances close to Lebzelter’s. Like her, Nadler survived the ghetto with

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and the several pages devoted to the ghetto in Ancel, *Transnistria*, vol. 1. The one book dedicated exclusively to Moghilev is a memoir mentioned above written by Siegfried Jägendorf, arguably the most privileged (Jewish) man in Transnistria. Though he played a crucial role in the rescue of many lives and the book is valuable to scholars on many levels, his experience was, needless to say, hardly representative of ghetto life. Jägendorf, *Jägendorf’s Foundry*.

33 Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman, “Introduction: Toward a Microhistory of the Holocaust,” in *Microhistories of the Holocaust*, eds. Claire Zalc and Tal Bruttman (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2017), 6.

34 Zalc and Bruttman, “Toward a Microhistory,” 2.

35 I acknowledge that, while critically regretting the absence of such a study, I myself am not willing to assume such a task. My current larger research project focuses on survivor experience in early post-war Romania and, as such, the present study on the Moghilev ghetto serves “merely” as a foreword, albeit a crucial one, of sorts.

36 B.S. Gregory, “Is Small Beautiful? Microhistory and the History of Everyday Life,” *History and Theory* 38 (1999), 100–110, paraphrased by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon and István Szijártó in *What is Microhistory: Theory and Practice* (Oxon: Routledge, 2013), 5. On microhistories, see also Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), and Alain Corbin, *The Life of an Unknown: The Rediscovered World of a Clog Maker in 19<sup>th</sup> Century France*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). Corbin stresses that “the exclusive study of larger entities may well obscure what life was really like for the residents of these tiny communities” (120).

37 The following testimonies from the Fortunoff Archive were drawn upon: Leah K., HVT 4166; Edgar H., HVT 3726; Elsie B., HVT 1228; Mikel C., HVT 1204; Norbert N., HVT 0536; Dora and Salo R., HVT 0012; Shmuel S. and Dora R., HVT 0013; Michael S., HVT 1749; Pearl T., HVT 2639; Yuri R., HVT 3294; Zvi O., HVT 3767; Ernest E., HVT 1499; Max K., HVT 1964; Dori L., HVT 0593; Gusta K., HVT 1608; Olga F., HVT 2602.

family members but without a sweetheart, partner, or children. He was a native German speaker, middle class, from a solidly rooted Czernowitz family – all characteristics of Lebzelter. As she did, Nadler moved to Romania after the war and emigrated in the early 1960s. It is this man’s testimony that I use as a framework, and his narrative thread I follow below.<sup>38</sup> I begin each thematic section with an excerpt from Nadler’s interview and a second quotation from another testimonial source; the quotations are followed by contextualisation.

### Moghilev-Podolsky: Transnistrian Transit Point

*We come over there.<sup>39</sup> In the meantime, it [had] become dark and it’s evening. We didn’t have where to go. And we saw some ruins. So we went into this ruins. It was an old factory. I do not know what kind of factory. We found one room. And in this room there were already some fifteen people. So we went in, another ten.*

Norbert Nadler<sup>40</sup>

*In Moghilev we met an old acquaintance, who took us in. The other people who had been deported with us and were unable to find a room had to continue on, but we could stay in Moghilev and that is why we survived.*

Felicia Gininger<sup>41</sup>

Transnistria, literally “beyond the Nister [River],” was an arbitrarily created territory between the Dniester and southern Bug rivers ceded by the Germans to Romania in the summer of 1941. The region had belonged to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic but had not existed as a unified territory as such.<sup>42</sup> It became a dumping ground of sorts for Jews deported by the Romanians from Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Dorohoi (administratively joined to Bukovina in the interwar period, but not a part of historic Bukovina).<sup>43</sup> Herded into hundreds of makeshift “camps” which could denote anything from abandoned (or occupied) homes to shacks, shelters intended for animals, or empty terrain surrounded by fencing, thousands would perish from starvation, disease, and exposure. What has come to be known as the “Romanian

38 I initially intended to choose a woman, but the female testimonies held by the Fortunoff Archive differed from Lebzelter significantly in that all of the interviewees were either children in the ghetto (and often orphaned), or else already mothers who therefore suffered the death or near-death of their own children. While acknowledging the significant discrepancy in experience that gender entails, I found that the role of mother within a ghetto brought with it an exceptional array of concerns and priorities rarely applicable to non-mothers. For the full contextualisation of Nadler’s testimony see “Introduction to the Testimony of Norbert Nadler,” Critical Editions: Holocaust Testimonies in Historical Context of the Fortunoff Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies: <https://editions.fortunoff.library.yale.edu/> (forthcoming 2022).

39 Nadler is referring to the fact that the deportees had crossed the Dniester River.

40 Norbert N., HVT 536.

41 Felicia Gininger, “‘Goethe kann man nicht verbrennen,’ sagte Mama” [“You Cannot Burn Goethe,” Said Mama], in Coldewey, “Czernowitz is gewen,” 26.

42 I will not rehash the administrative details of the territory here, which has been done by others: see Vladimir Solonari, *A Satellite Empire*; Jeffrey Veidlinger, “Life beyond the River: Transnistria,” in *In the Shadow of the Shtetl: Small-Town Jewish Life in Soviet Ukraine* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), esp. 186–189; and Dumitru, “Jews and Their Neighbors in Occupied Transnistria,” *The State, Antisemitism, and Collaboration in the Holocaust*, esp. 176–181. The Jewish population in the region of Transnistria before the war was approximately 300,000, with 180,000 of those being in the only major city, Odessa. Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 187.

43 Due to considerations of space, I do not describe events leading up to the arrival in Moghilev of the deportees. For details on this, in the same vein as this article, see my essay on Norbert Nadler’s full testimony, “Introduction to the Testimony of Norbert Nadler.”

Holocaust” or the “Transnistrian Holocaust” saw the deaths of between 250,000 and 300,000 Jews at the hands of the Romanian state.<sup>44</sup>

The town of Moghilev<sup>45</sup> was originally designated as a transit point for the Jewish deportees, but due to poor organisation and the sheer number of deportees, it came to harbour the largest ghetto in Transnistria. An estimated 50,000 to 60,000 deportees passed through or remained in the town between October 1941 and February 1942.<sup>46</sup> Between 15,000 and 20,000 Jews were housed there at various points: during a 1943 census, 12,588 Jews were registered.<sup>47</sup>

Moghilev had seen battle and part of the city was destroyed. There had also been recent flooding. The ravaged town appeared as a sodden ruin, dank and crumbling: “Moghilev had been through a large flood. The houses were all wet, many were without windows and doors”, recalled one survivor.<sup>48</sup> As Nadler describes in the quote above, the first order of business was to find a place to sleep. Initially the deportees could reside wherever they found shelter. Survivors describe sleeping in the ruins of barracks,<sup>49</sup> a gymnasium,<sup>50</sup> schools,<sup>51</sup> cellars,<sup>52</sup> a cinema,<sup>53</sup> and the town hall.<sup>54</sup>

Many of the deportees were – at first – unsure whether it was better to try to remain in the town or to continue eastwards. Several survivors describe leaving Moghilev deliberately, while others did all they could to evade further deportation.<sup>55</sup> Over the course of the war, if those deported east managed to escape, they frequently attempted to make their way back to Moghilev, seeking what many hoped would be

44 That the deaths followed an antisemitic ideology of the “purification” of the state has been proven by scholars. For a concise overview of numbers, dates, and administrative orders, see Dennis Deletant, “Transnistria and the Romanian Solution to the ‘Jewish Problem,’” in *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony, Memorialization*, eds. Wendy Lower and Ray Brandon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 156–189. The exact numbers of the dead are disputed and difficult to verify completely. I use the figures quoted by Deletant: he cites 147,000 deported Bukovinian and Bessarabian Jews, of which 90,000 perished and 57,000 survived. In addition, an estimated 130,000 to 170,000 local Ukrainian Jews were killed or died of starvation, disease, or exposure. Deletant, “Transnistria,” in *Shoah in Ukraine*, 157, fns. 4 and 5. The numbers for Transnistria in general are also complex. Hilberg’s figures differ somewhat: he estimates that, of the 160,000 deportees from Bukovina and Bessarabia, approximately 51,000 were alive (so 109,000 had died) in September 1943. Raul Hilberg, *The Destruction of the European Jews* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2:847–848. Regardless of the precise figures, experts generally agree that more or less one-third of the deportees survived.

45 In Ukrainian it is called “Mohyliv-Podilskyi,” and in Romanian “Moghilău.” The town is most frequently referred to as “Moghilev” by survivors, and I follow this usage. Please note that this should not be confused with the Belarusian town of Mogilev.

46 Of the pre-war population of almost 9,000, between 3,000 and 4,000 remained in the town during the war. Coldewey, *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 56–57; “Mogilev-Podolskiy,” *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia*, 493; “Moghilev-Podolsk,” *USHMM Encyclopedia*, 715. In 1939, the Jewish population was 8,703, or forty per cent of the total population. Yehuda Slutsky and Shmuel Spector, “Mogilev-Podolski,” *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007), 14:418.

47 Due to continual deaths, new arrivals, and regular deportations further east, population numbers were in constant flux, though numbers appeared to have hovered around 15,000 for most of the war. “Mogilev-Podolskiy,” *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia*, 493, and “Moghilev-Podolsk,” *USHMM Encyclopedia*, 715.

48 Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 57.

49 Jewgenija Finkel and Markus Winkler, eds., *Juden aus Czernowitz: Ghetto, Deportation, Vernichtung 1941–1944: Überlebende berichten* [Jews from Czernowitz: Ghetto, Deportation, Destruction 1941–1944: Survivors Narrate], trans. by Kateryna Stetskevych (Konstanz: Hartung-Gorre, 2004), 42; Yosef Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction: Recollections of Transnistria and Illegal Immigration to Eretz Israel 1941–1947* (Portland: Valentine Mitchell, 2007), 39.

50 Coldewey et al., “Czernowitz is gewen,” 61.

51 Edgar H., HVT 3726.

52 Coldewey et al. (eds.), “Czernowitz is gewen,” 25.

53 Ernest E., HVT 1499.

54 Warzmann in Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 59.

55 Miriam Korber records that, remarkably, her family paid Germans to transport them on trucks farther east, see Korber, *Deportiert*, 58–59. In contrast, Yosef Govrin describes simply stepping out of the convoy line, together with his mother and aunts, and slipping into a nearby carpentry shop, in order to remain. Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 40. See also Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 57–58.



a degree of anonymity – and thus security – amongst a larger population.<sup>56</sup> Nadler, who was deported from Czernowitz together with his parents and siblings, determined to stay. The group quickly recognised the priorities for survival: shelter and employment, which should, in turn, ensure food.

### Work and Social Status

*So my brother-in-law had the first idea, say, OK, I can do any work you want. So there was a tool and die factory. [He] said, yeah, I worked always in tool and die. So he went over there. Start[ed] working in tool and die, start[ed] learning. The factory was – was managed by Jews, Jewish engineers from Romania, already which was over there. And they were trying to teach you. You get at least a meal a day. And the meal was so big that you can take a little bit home for – to have another half meal at home. And he has the authority [authorization] to stay because he was working.*

Norbert Nadler<sup>57</sup>

*I thought with the time, I could give lessons for which I could get a few potatoes or a few marks and maybe even a little room.*

Lydia Harnik<sup>58</sup>

Nadler's brother-in-law probably worked at what is known as "Jägendorf's foundry" (*turnatoria* in Romanian). Siegfried Jägendorf was an engineer, originally from the southern Bukovinian town of Radautz, who was selected as a leader within the ghetto, with connections to the Romanian authorities.<sup>59</sup> He immediately set to work convincing the authorities of the need for the foundry to be repaired and secured workers for the undertaking. Precise numbers of those saved through the foundry are hard to come by. Lists of personnel from 1943 and 1944 include around six hundred workers, but because of the benefits of employment in the factory – both official in the form of residence permits and unofficial in terms of food, and the implications thereof extending to family members – the number of people who survived due to the enterprise was certainly many times higher than the number of those with permits alone.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, there is some indication that there was even room for manoeuvre to "adopt" people onto employment permits.<sup>61</sup>

Jägendorf was not viewed positively by everyone and he remains a controversial figure, some seeing in him a dandy who worked to save first and foremost those closest to him and ensure himself material comforts, others seeing a man who fought to

56 One woman, a girl at the time, escaped from multiple Transnistrian death camps further east and returned each time to Moghilev. Initially she went to her aunt, and then to a Ukrainian woman outside the ghetto who cared for her. Leah K., HVT 4166.

57 Norbert N., HVT 536.

58 Lydia Harnik, "Man liebte weiterhin Österreich" ["One Continued to Love Austria"], in Coldewey et al., "Czernowitz is gewen," 41.

59 I discuss community leaders later in the article. For Jägendorf's own account of the ghetto experience, see Jägendorf, *Jägendorf's Foundry*.

60 The list from 1944 includes the number (and names) of dependents alongside the workers, often listing four to six dependents and several times up to seven. Yad Vashem Archives, Jerusalem, Archive of Siegfried Jaegendorf, President of the Jewish Coordinating Committee for the Deported Jews in Transnistria, 1941–1967, P. 9, "List of the Jewish laborers in the Turnatoria factory in Mogilev" (1944), and "List of the Jewish laborers in the Turnatoria factory in Mogilev" (1943).

61 Govrin writes: "At a certain stage our names were added to those [of] one of the foundry's workers, an engineer by profession, and his family. This afforded us some protection, but we did not rely on it too much." Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 46.

save as many lives as possible under harrowing conditions.<sup>62</sup> It remains undisputed that many lives were indeed saved as a result of the foundry's operation. Nevertheless, even if one assumes that the foundry saved between four to five times above the number of six hundred official workers, this amounts to between two thousand and three thousand lives. In a ghetto of around fifteen thousand people, this is a significant fraction of the population, yet hardly a majority. Moreover, those employed were more likely to be educated, technically trained, or with personal connections to the well-off leadership, that is, they were already of the privileged class. What of the less fortunate? Indeed, as Nadler's and other testimonies reveal, there was stark social stratification within the ghetto.<sup>63</sup> Nadler explains: "[...] the Jews have just right [a] way been divided. The Jews from the occupied territory, from – from Moghilev, they were the worst. The Jews from Bessarabia, they were the second worst. And we, from the Bukovina, which came in, we were considered a little bit better."

In an article on ghetto leadership, Gali Mir-Tibon discusses this hierarchy at length.<sup>64</sup> The divisions fell primarily along the lines of national borders. Those Jews who were living in the Soviet Union at the time of the Romanian occupation (i.e. those from Moghilev) were thus at the bottom. Above them were those from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, who had lived for one year under the Soviet regime. At the top were those Jews from southern Bukovina and Dorohoi who had, since 1918, lived within the Romanian state. Those who had had greater affiliation with the Soviets were suspected by the authorities of espionage, while those from southern Bukovina and Dorohoi were considered the "most" Romanian. Socioeconomic status – which both resulted from and mirrored these shifting national boundaries – also played a role. Those who had never experienced life under communism arrived better off financially, with both valuables and cash, thus they were in a position to offer attractive bribes. Those from Moghilev, who had survived fighting, occupation, and *Einsatztruppen*, had nothing left with which to barter; probably they had little of value in the first place, having been part of the Soviet state already for twenty years.<sup>65</sup> Those from Bessarabia and northern Bukovina also arrived with few possessions, having already been dispossessed and made frail through marches by foot over the summer and early fall.<sup>66</sup> Czernowitzers, in contrast, though from northern Bukovina, generally arrived by train and with certain possessions intact. A significant portion was, moreover, of the educated, middle class and brought with them small valu-

62 In addition to his memoir, see also the collection at Yad Vashem: Archive of Siegfried Jaegendorf, President of the Jewish Coordinating Committee for the Deported Jews in Transnistria, 1941–1967, P. 9. The author, Edgar Hilsenrath, also found work in Jaegendorf's foundry. Edgar H., HVT 3726. Hilsenrath's name appears on the lists in Yad Vashem. He wrote a more than six-hundred-page tome, *Nacht* [Night], about the lives of the most impoverished in the Moghilev ghetto. Edgar Hilsenrath, *Nacht* (Zurich: Kinder, 1964).

63 Social stratification in Transnistrian ghettos is examined in several articles. See especially Ofer, *Life in the Ghettos*, 261–269.

64 Gali Mir-Tibon, "Am I My Brother's Keeper?," 127–146, esp. 137.

65 For an account of the fate of those Jews who were the original residents of the region of Transnistria, see Veidlinger, *In the Shadow of the Shtetl*, 186–231. Some of their fates overlapped with the deportees from Bukovina. For testimonies from the Soviet Jews of Transnistria, see also Boris Zabarko, "Nur wir haben überlebt": *Holocaust in der Ukraine: Zeugnisse und Dokumente* (Weilerswist-Metternich Dittrich, 2016).

66 The Romanians began deportations from Bessarabia in the summer of 1941, often shuttling hundreds of people back and forth between the Prut and Dniester rivers. Many thousands died of starvation, exposure, and disease. Those that survived were eventually brought to Moghilev for further transport east; some remained. There are conflicting accounts of the arrival of those from northern Bukovinian villages: some arrived in the summer having undergone the same experience as the Bessarabians of marching on foot from place to place, while others seem to have been deported from Czernowitz shortly before (or with?) the Czernowitzers. Unfortunately, there are no precise studies about the deportees from northern Bukovinian towns; accounts are instead conflicting. This confusion only demonstrates how much work is still to be done to understand even basic details about the Romanian Holocaust.

ables, such as jewellery. The original Jewish residents of Moghilev did, however, have one point in their favour – shelter. Without shelter, one was not only exposed to the elements but was also in grave danger of being rounded up in the regular “raids” and sent further east.

### Disease and Starvation

*Now the first winter you got the typhus. [...] And I would say between the hunger and the typhus, probably half of the population was exterminated. You were going out in the morning. It was cold. It was bitter cold. We didn't have anything [with which] to heat. We were seeing dead people on the street, in sitting position, in lying position, in closed position. And people were going, taking them out on the – getting them to the cemeteries. They couldn't even dig graves at that time, so they just covered them up with snow.*  
Norbert Nadler<sup>67</sup>

*I came to Moghilev and will not forget the scenes of the people who were killed. They were sitting in front of their houses, mothers holding children, sitting, and they were all dead. Death became part of my life.*  
Leah K.<sup>68</sup>

When Nadler first arrived in the autumn of 1941, Jews could and did live throughout the ruined city. A closed ghetto was only established in the summer of 1942, when the Jewish deportees were forced to live in established and restricted areas, cordoned off with barbed wire.<sup>69</sup> With the closing of the ghetto, the already straitened conditions became even more dire. As Nadler recalled: “so we were standing in the ghetto and they're not letting you out, but not letting in anything in the ghetto – no food, no clothing, nothing. So people – it was not – it was not an extermination camp. It was a starvation camp.”<sup>70</sup>

Death by disease or starvation went hand in hand and the true cause of death was often indistinguishable.<sup>71</sup> Epidemic typhus (*Flecktyphus*) was rampant during the first winter of 1941 to 1942, killing thousands.<sup>72</sup> Corpses littered the streets of the town:

67 Norbert N., HVT 536.

68 Leah K., HVT 4166.

69 Mir-Tibon, “Am I My Brother's Keeper?,” 131. Despite the fact that technically the “ghetto” was only established partway through the war, I use the term “Moghilev ghetto” throughout the present work both for simplicity's sake and because it is not clear to which degree the majority of the deportees palpably distinguished the administrative change. For most of the deportees, who were dreadfully impoverished, the entire period upon arrival until liberation was experienced as a period of ruthless restrictions regarding residence, whether due to a lack of funds, the ravaged state of existing shelters, or official sanctions. For more on the establishment of official ghettos, see Mir-Tibon, “Am I My Brother's Keeper?,” 129–130. The entry in the *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia* states that, when the ghetto was officially established in 1942, the Jews were made to build a wall from rubble around the borders, topping this with barbed wire. “Mogilev-Podolskiy,” *Yad Vashem Encyclopedia*, 495. Lebzelter also refers to the walls in an emotionally laden declaration regarding the ghetto's liberation: “We lived to see it. I stood on a low rise and saw the Soviet tanks run down the camp walls shutting us in, we were free, now there were no more boundaries between Jew and Christian, between man and man.” Due to the almost propagandistic tropes she employed, I have sometimes questioned the accuracy of her description. LBI, Blanca Lebzelter Collection, AR 25437, Box 1, Folder 1, “Mein Bruder [My Brother]” (1955).

70 Norbert N., HVT 536.

71 Hilsenrath makes this wry point in the conclusion of his book, *Nacht*, when the main character is assumed to have died of typhus, but in fact dies of starvation after he is robbed of food by an acquaintance. Hilsenrath, *Nacht*.

72 On the typhus epidemic in Moghilev, see Ancel, *Transnistria*, 1:357–362. Ancel writes that, in April 1942, there were 4,451 cases, with 28 per cent of the ill succumbing to death. Ancel, *Transnistria*, 1:360. Hirt-Manheimer writes that approximately 7,000 Jews were infected in Moghilev, of whom half survived (source not cited). Hirt-Manheimer, *Jagendorf's Foundry*, 57. The true number may lie somewhere in between these two figures.

Even more horrible was to move around in the streets in the mornings. Corpses were taken out of the houses and dumped on carriages. [...] Even when the death toll from typhus abated, the number of the dying did not decline, since many succumbed to other infectious diseases or starvation. This meant that the terrifying scene of wagons collecting the dead continued almost the whole time we were in the Moghilev ghetto.<sup>73</sup>

Typhus is spread by lice and thus outbreaks occur under squalid living conditions, such as were unavoidable among the deportees of Transnistria. The disease runs its course in approximately two weeks, but thousands did not survive what was referred to as the “crisis”, occurring around day twelve or thirteen. Those who did survive and who had the good fortune to have access to regular food were confronted with the constant danger of being further deported to sites of greater lethality.

### Raids and the Privilege of Connections

*And this bureau of evidence<sup>74</sup> was supposed to give the lists. So they [i.e. the Romanians] weren't coming to take you out. It was the dirty work of the Jews who have to bring up the people to be transported to – to the places. So I had this friend at the bureau of evidence. And he knew a day or two before when such an action is going to come.*

*And he knew more or less which places are going to be involved.*

*So this was the reason how we survived this fall of '42.*

*Norbert Nadler<sup>75</sup>*

*I remembered that in Czernowitz a man worked, whom we named “Hitzel,” and he patrolled the streets with his cart to catch dogs. It was exactly like this now, in the streets of the Moghilev ghetto.*

*Emil Wenkert<sup>76</sup>*

The Jewish committee of Moghilev understood that survival depended on the deportees being made useful, even indispensable, and correspondingly created as many jobs as possible.<sup>77</sup> However, the leaders were also taxed with peopling lists for deportations further east: some of those deported went to work camps, some to so-called “death camps”.<sup>78</sup> The Jewish police, referred to by most survivors with fear and disgust, were charged with rounding up the deportees. Being caught and put on one of these trains was generally understood as a death sentence.

73 Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 43.

74 Nadler's reference to a “bureau of evidence” is a direct translation of the Romanian *birou de evidență*, indicating a generic registration office which would keep track of people's places of residence and deal with identity cards or papers.

75 Norbert N., HVT 536.

76 Wenkert, *Czernowitzer Schicksale*, 24.

77 The committee was formed by order of the vice prefect of the Moghilev district on 18 November 1941. Most members were Jewish and the membership changed often. See Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 71–72. For a detailed analysis of the actions of the leadership of the ghetto, see Mir-Tibon, “Am I My Brother's Keeper?” Mir-Tibon designates this as “rescue-through-work, which essentially meant providing a flexible Jewish workforce, appropriately trained, with almost no demands in terms of remuneration, thereby presenting itself as valuable to the Romanian authorities and worth maintaining.” Mir-Tibon, “Am I My Brother's Keeper?” 133–134.

78 Pecioara was designated as “lagărul morții”, the death camp, by the Romanians. Pecioara, *USHMM Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos*, 3:742.

Two different sorts of deportations from Moghilev took place in 1942. First, the Romanian authorities were worried that the typhus epidemic would spread to populations outside the ghettos, especially to the soldiers. To curb the overcrowding and unhygienic living conditions contributing to the epidemic, in the summer of 1942 a command was issued to send four thousand Jews from Moghilev to Scazineți and three thousand to Pecioara. At these sites, the population was essentially cordoned off and left to die.<sup>79</sup> Second, Jews were sent as forced labourers for the Nazi-run “Organisation Todt,” which used slave labourers to construct roads and bridges. There was little prospect of returning from forced labour for the Nazis.

Survival was guaranteed to none, but as Nadler indicated in the quotation above referencing the acquaintance at the registration office, those with connections, whether familial or otherwise, had better chances. Yosef Govrin recalls the hierarchy of survival:

Three main problems faced us. First, vigilance – we had to remain constantly alert to avoid being caught and deported further eastwards. Second, basic existence – how could we make a living? The reservoir of our belongings was almost dried up. What would we do when there was nothing more to sell? And third, integration – how to become part of the daily life that had been organised in the ghetto?<sup>80</sup>

The narratives accessible to us today are, by nature, almost exclusively those of the relatively privileged, who inhabited rungs higher up the hierarchical ladder. Those who survived did so primarily because they were through some means able to procure work, food, and shelter. In his interview, author Edgar Hilsenrath states explicitly that his experience was privileged,<sup>81</sup> while Nadler acknowledged as much in the following exchange:

David Terman [interviewer]: Why do you think you survived and the others did not?

Norbert N.: Because we were working. We were working. And not only we were working, we were working in the right places.<sup>82</sup>

In linking their survival to their employment, both men nod to the elevated position of workers in the ghetto hierarchy. Securing work was vital, but hardly possible for all. Published studies about or by former leaders of the ghetto describe the leadership committee as arranging work for thousands of deportees, but Nadler’s account suggests a more nuanced reality, in which great responsibility lay on the individual to procure work. Hilsenrath’s novel, *Night*, which describes in harrowing detail the lives and deaths of those clinging to the lowest rungs of the ghetto, is entirely void of leadership figures: the impoverished characters seek work, housing, and sustenance on their own; despite herculean efforts, they often fail.<sup>83</sup>

An interview with one woman, an orphan, and thus representative of one of the few narratives accessible today of the least privileged, described the brutal reality for

79 Mir-Tibon, *Brother’s Keeper*, 134, and Coldewey et al., *Zwischen Pruth und Jordan*, 65–58. According to the *USHMM Encyclopaedia*, approximately four thousand Jews perished in Pecioara, and 350 were liberated in the spring of 1944. “Pecioara,” *USHMM Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos* 3, 742–743. Death numbers for Scazineți are less clear, but 1,500 were alive when the camp was dissolved in September 1942. “Scazineți,” *USHMM Encyclopaedia of Camps and Ghettos* 3, 756–757.

80 Govrin, *In the Shadow of Destruction*, 44.

81 Edgar H., HVT 3726.

82 Norbert N., HVT 536.

83 I believe the novel *Night*, with its six hundred pages and rich social detail, represents a unique source on ghetto life in Moghilev. In his own oral history interview, Hilsenrath states that “*Night* is the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky, but I used a fictional name.” However, due to methodological considerations regarding the incorporation of literary works into this historical analysis, I refer to it here rarely.



a child lacking all protection. The woman recollected her attempts to procure assistance from the official orphanage: “I know that money was sent but I never got any help from the *Judenrat*. Every time I went for a garment, a shoe, [they said] ‘we don’t have, we don’t have.’” For a time, she slept at the orphanage, which she described as “hell”. Then she, along with some others, heard that children from the orphanage were being put on the deportation lists and they fled, taking shelter in “a bombed-out house” and sleeping “on rags, branches, like the birds”. Later, after a Ukrainian woman had taken her in and was housing her outside the ghetto, she was caught by two of the Jewish police: “The minute they heard me speak (Romanian), they kidnapped me, pulled me into the ghetto, put me on a death train to Pecioara. They let out someone else. That person gave them a package of cigarettes. That was what my life was worth.”<sup>84</sup>

As the example above demonstrates, while the relative security afforded by regular employment and personal connections was an unheard of luxury for the majority of those in the ghetto, family, too, was an irreplaceable force. Nadler also survived because he was with family members who protected and provided for one another. In a world in which morality stood on end, family members represented the last and final bastion of protection. In a statement exemplifying the tight web of work, sustenance, and familial support, Nadler explains:

“[My father received] at least one meal a day. And this was very much. This was very much. And I remember, I didn’t touch a meal at home because I ate outside. My brother-in-law didn’t touch a meal at home because he – my late father didn’t touch a meal at home because he ate with the peasants. So whatever came in home was for the rest of the family.”<sup>85</sup>

## Conclusion

In my work, I believe that tracing the lives and experiences – in however fragmented a form – of those who were of little consequence to the authorities is a crucial task. These voices, however, are challenging to find, as many left little or no historical mark; by default they are often grouped together as anonymous masses in historical studies. By focusing a lens on the voice of one person, however, we can access individual experience. Zalc and Bruttman describe how “reducing the level of analysis increases knowledge, because smaller spaces can better elucidate the complexities of decision-making, help reestablish the ‘space of the possible,’ show how reality was experienced at the individual level, and ultimately provide more compelling insights into the events that contemporaries faced in their day-to-day lives.”<sup>86</sup> In Nadler’s life, his ability and initiative to secure regular work proved crucial, as did the personal connection within the Jewish ghetto administration which enabled him and his family to evade further deportations. The existence of multiple family members, many of whom were able to procure at least limited daily meals, facilitated the survival of the women, who were less likely to obtain work in the factories or as hard labourers and were consequently more likely to be viewed by the Jewish committee as “non-productive” and convenient for deportation.<sup>87</sup>

84 Leah K., HVT 4166.

85 Norbert N., HVT 536.

86 Zalc and Bruttman, “Toward a Microhistory,” 3.

87 Mir-Tibon specifies that in particular single mothers and their children were selected for deportation due to this reasoning. Mir-Tibon, “Brother’s Keeper,” 136. Mir-Tibon chose a fictional framework in which to reflect

Through narrating and contextualising Nadler’s story, I have sought to concretely reconstruct stations of passage for survival (or death) for individuals within the Moghilev-Podolsky ghetto, highlighting possible spaces of agency under coercive conditions and examining implications of privilege, or its absence, in daily life. The exercise is not one of representation for all those who were left mute; instead, working on this microhistorical level highlights “the normal exception, which is both difficult and stimulating”.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, Nadler’s story is “both exemplary and exceptional”<sup>89</sup> as he survived where thousands of others did not, yet he was able to do so as a result of concrete circumstances that were encountered in variation by others. While I hope that this study contributes to the discourse on Transnistria and especially aspects of life in the ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky, it should also reveal the breadth of potential inquiry that still exists within the field.

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on the plight of these women and children and of the men in power who chose them for deportation, Gali Mir-Tibon, *Reshimat Ha-Imahot* [The List of the Mothers] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2017).

88 Zalc and Bruttman, “Toward a Microhistory,” 4.

89 Zalc and Bruttman, “Toward a Microhistory,” 5.

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Quotation: Julie Dawson, Survival in the Ghetto of Moghilev-Podolsky. A Microhistorical Inquiry, in: S.I.M.O.N. – Shoah: Intervention. Methods. DocumentatiON. 9 (2022) 1, 79–93.

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